



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING AND THE NEGRO

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a poetic artist who was intensely concerned with the large human movements of the world and the age into which she was thrown. Her whole life was one great heart-throb. While the condition of her health and the nature of her early training were such as to cultivate her rather bookish and romantic temperament, she followed with eagerness the great social reforms in England in the reign of William IV and the early years of Victoria; and *The Cry of the Children* and *The Cry of the Human* indicated what was to be one of her chief lines of interest. In her later years she threw herself heart and soul into the cause of Italian independence and unity, welcoming Napoleon III as a benefactor. Her political judgment was not always sound: her distinguished husband could not possibly follow her in her admiration for Napoleon, whom he regarded as to some extent at least a charlatan, and Cavour simply represented his countrymen in his amazement and chagrin at the terms of the Peace of Villafranca; nevertheless the great heart of Elizabeth Barrett Browning was ever moved by the demands of liberty, whether the immediate impulse was a child in the sweat-shops of England, an Italian wishing to be free of Austria, or the exiled Victor Hugo, and there was no exaggeration in the tribute placed on the wall of Casa Guidi after her death:

Qui scrisse e morì
Elizabetta Barrett Browning
che in cuore di donna conciliava
scienza di dotto e spirito di poeta
e fece del suo verso aureo anello
fra Italia e Inghilterra
pone questa lapide
Firenze grata
1861¹

To such a woman the Negro, held in slavery in a great free republic, made a ready appeal. The first concrete connection, however, was one directly affecting the fortunes of the Barrett family. For some years Mr. Barrett had made his home at a beautiful estate in Herefordshire known as Hope End. He had inherited from his maternal grandfather a large estate in Jamaica, where the families of both his parents had been established for two or three generations. The abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833 inflicted great financial embarrassment upon him, as a result of which he was forced to sell Hope End and to remove his family, first to Sidmouth in Devonshire, and subsequently to London. Elizabeth Barrett foreshadowed this change of fortunes in a letter to her friend Mrs. Martin dated Sidmouth, May 27, 1833:

The West Indians are irreparably ruined if the Bill passes. Papa says that in the case of its passing, nobody in his senses would think of even attempting the culture of sugar, and that they had better hang weights to the sides of the island of Jamaica and sink it at once.²

In September of the same year she wrote from Sidmouth to the same friend as follows:

Of course you know that the late Bill has ruined the West Indians. That is settled. The consternation here is very great. Nevertheless I am glad, and always shall be, that the Negroes are—virtually—free.³

It is some years before we find another reference so definite. Miss Barrett in the meantime became Mrs. Browning and under the inspiration of love and Italy gave herself

¹ For the inscription we are indebted to the Cambridge edition of the poems of Mrs. Browning, edited by Harriet Waters Preston, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, p. xii. Translation: Here wrote and died Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who united to a woman's heart the learning of a savant and the inspiration of a poet, and made her verse a golden link between Italy and England. This tablet was set by grateful Florence in 1861.

² *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, edited by Frederic G. Kenton, 2 vols., Macmillan, New York and London, 1898. Vol. I, p. 21.

³ *Letters*, I, 23.

anew to her work. The feeling for liberty was constantly with her, as was to be seen from *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Poems before Congress*. About 1855, when she was on a visit to England, through the work of Daniel D. Home, a notorious American exponent of spiritualism, Mrs. Browning became interested in the current fad, and gave to it vastly more serious attention than most other initiates. Browning himself, while patient, was intolerably irritated with those whom he regarded as imposing on his wife's credulity, and delivered himself on the subject in *Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium.'* Spiritualism, however, was a topic of never-failing interest between Mrs. Browning and her American friend, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom she entertained in Italy. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made a profound impression upon her. In 1853 this book was still in the great flush of its first success. On April 12, 1853, Mrs. Browning wrote from Florence to Mrs. Jameson as follows:

Not read Mrs. Stowe's book! *But you must.* Her book is quite a sign of the times, and has otherwise and intrinsically considerable power. For myself, I rejoice in the success, both as a woman and a human being. Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself, I think, as in the times of old, shut herself up with the Penelopes in the "women's apartment," and take no rank among thinkers and speakers. Certainly you are not in earnest in these things. A difficult question—yes! All virtue is difficult. England found it difficult. France found it difficult. But we did not make ourselves an armchair of our sins. As for America, I honor America in much; but I would not be an American for the world while she wears that shameful scar upon her brow. The address of the new president⁴ exasperates me. Observe, I am an abolitionist, not to the fanatical degree, because I hold that compensation should be given by the North to the South, as in England. The states should unite in buying off this national disgrace.⁵

⁴ I. e., Franklin Pierce.

⁵ *Letters*, II, 110.

Under date Florence, December 11, 1854, Mrs. Browning wrote to Miss Mitford as follows:

I am reading now Mrs. Stowe's *Sunny Memories*, and like the naturalness and simplicity of the book much, in spite of the provincialism of the tone of mind and education, and the really wretched writing. It's quite wonderful that a woman who has written a book to make the world ring should write so abominably.⁶

More and more as the Civil War approached was Mrs. Browning depressed by the thought of the impending conflict. Between June 7, 1860, and July 25, 1861, she contributed to the recently established *Independent* eleven poems, chiefly on subjects of Italian liberty. Sometimes, however, especially in the letters accompanying her poems, she touched on themes somewhat closer to the American people. For the issue of March 21, 1861, she wrote to the editor as follows:

My partiality for frenzies is not so absorbing, believe me, as to exclude very painful consideration on the dissolution of your great Union. But my serious fear has been, and is, not for the dissolution of the body but the death of the soul—not of a rupture of states and civil war, but at reconciliation and peace at the expense of a deadly compromise of principle. Nothing will destroy the Republic but what corrupts its conscience and disturbs its fame—for the stain upon the honor must come off upon the flag. *If, on the other hand, the North stands fast on the moral ground, no glory will be like your glory.* . . . What surprises me is that the slaves don't rise.

On this great subject Mrs. Browning found her husband in full sympathy with her. Browning himself declared in a letter to an American, September 11, 1861:

I have lost the explanation of American affairs, but I assure you of my belief in the justice and my confidence in the triumph of the great cause. For the righteousness of the principle I want no information. God prosper it and its defenders.⁷

⁶ *Letters*, II, 183.

⁷ Quoted from *Browning Society Papers*, Part XII, by Elizabeth Porter Gould in *The Brownings and America*, p. 55.

Two poems by Mrs. Browning at least have to do directly with the Negro and American affairs. One was *A Curse for a Nation* contributed to the *Poems before Congress* volume. The poet begins somewhat self-consciously:

I heard an angel speak last night,
 And he said "Write!
 Write a Nation's curse for me,
 And send it over the Western Sea."

She protests her unwillingness to execute such a commission, for, she says,

I am bound by gratitude
 By love and blood,
 To brothers of mine across the sea,
 Who stretch out kindly hands to me.

The angel, however, beats down this unwillingness and the curse follows, the second stanza reading:

Because yourselves are standing straight
 In the state
 Of Freedom's foremost acolyte,
 Yet keep calm footing all the time
 On writhing bond-slaves,—for this crime
 This is the curse. Write.

At best, however, *A Curse for a Nation* can hardly help impressing one as a little forced. In rather higher poetic vein is the other poem, *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*. This was contributed to *The Liberty Bell*, a publication issued by the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazar in 1848. Mrs. Browning feared that the poem might be "too ferocious for the Americans to publish." The composition is undoubtedly a strong one. It undertakes to give the story of a young Negro woman who was bound in slavery, whose lover was crushed before her face, who was forced to submit to personal violation, who killed her child that so much reminded her of her white master's face, and who at last at Pilgrim's Point defied her pursuers. With

unusual earnestness the poet has entered sympathetically into the subject. The following stanzas are typical:

But *we* who are dark, we are dark
 Ah God, we have no stars!
 About our souls in care and cark
 Our blackness shuts like prison-bars:
 The poor souls crouch so far behind
 That never a comfort can they find
 By reaching through the prison-bars.

Why, in that single glance I had
 Of my child's face, . . . I tell you all,
 I saw a look that made me mad
 The *master's* look, that used to fall
 On my soul like his lash . . . or worse
 And so, to save it from my curse,
 I twisted it round in my shawl.

From the white man's house, and the black man's hut,
 I carried the little body on;
 The forest's arm did round us shut,
 And silence through the trees did run:
 They asked no question as I went,
 They stood too high for astonishment,
 They could see God sit on his throne.

(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift!—)
 I wish you who stand there five abreast,
 Each, for his own wife's joy and gift,
 A little corpse as safely at rest
 As mine in the mangoes! Yes, but *she*
 My keep live babies on her knee,
 And sing the song she likes the best.

In such a review as this of the connections between Mrs. Browning and the Negro one can not help coming face to face with the question whether her famous husband was not himself connected by blood with the Negro race. The strain is hardly so pronounced as in men like Alexandre Dumas

or Leigh Hunt, and as in the case of Alexander Hamilton, the point still seems to be waiting for final proof. The assertion is persistent, however, and there can be little doubt that such is the case. The standard life of Browning,⁸ after wrestling in vain with the problem, dismisses it as follows:

Dr. Furnivall has originated a theory, and maintains it as a conviction, that Mr. Browning's grandmother was more than a Creole in the strict sense of the term, that of a person born of white parents in the West Indies, and that an unmistakable dash of dark blood passed from her to her son and grandson. Such an occurrence was, on the face of it, not impossible, and would be absolutely unimportant to my mind, and, I think I may add, to that of Mr. Browning's sister and son. The poet and his father were what we know them, and if Negro blood had any part in their composition, it was no worse for them, and so much the better for the Negro.

Aside from this last point, from the evidence that has been given, while this of course has its limitations, we may safely assert that with her large humanity and her enthusiasm for liberty, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the sturdiest defenders in England of the cause of the American Negro at the time of the beginning of the Civil War. It is to be regretted that she did not live to read the Emancipation Proclamation and to see the Negro started on an era of self-reliance and progress.

BENJAMIN BRAWLEY

⁸ Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*. 2 vols. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1891. Vol. I, p. 8.